

## Coping Mechanisms by midnighteverlark

**Category:** Stranger Things (TV 2016)

**Genre:** Aged-Up Character(s), Angst with a Happy Ending, Bisexual Mike Wheeler, Gay Will Byers, Happy ending though I swear, Internalized Homophobia, M/M, Prostitution basically?, Will got fucked up from all the trauma and has some unhealthy coping mechanisms, like i said mildly dark, mildly dark, they're like 17, underage but only by a little bit

**Language:** English

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**Summary:**

In the end, he could blame it on the Mind Flayer. Or the Demogorgon. Really, he could blame it on a lot of things. But ultimately he knows this is something that comes from inside of himself. He can't pin it on any outside sources; not even the trauma. He's just broken.

And that's fine. Honestly. He doesn't mind it. He decided long ago. If he's a fag, he's going to be the best damn fag there ever was. He's good at it, too. It started with blow jobs; small favors here and there. Word spread. It snowballed. Guys started seeking him out, and Will discovered that he didn't mind when they were rough with him. Even when it hurts. He doesn't care. The pain and manhandling make the pleasure all the sweeter. And anyway, he tells himself he'd rather be useful, be wanted, and that he gets to be with guys this way, and that's an improvement over being isolated and lonely and pent-up. It is.

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Will turns to some unhealthy coping mechanisms to deal with the trauma leftover from years ago, and to deal with his own sexuality. And he feels like he's doing a fine job of handling it on his own, thank you very much, until Mike gets tangled up in it.

## 1. Hands

### Author's Note:

Guys, I have... no idea what this is. I read a HC where Will was kinda fucked up by the Mind Flayer and a few years down the road he turned to empty sex as a coping mechanism and I do not know why but the idea fucking TOOK HOLD of me.

So, a warning: this is poorly thought-out and poorly developed and not quite my usual style, and it's probably pretty OOC. I wrote most of it in a feverish rush before I had to leave for work. It's a lot of mature shit and smut, so if you're not into that you've been warned.

But uh... enjoy?

(The fic that got me thinking about this version of Will was Puppet Show by Mylesime, in case anyone is curious; it's brilliantly painful or perhaps painfully brilliant, go check it out, full props to her for inspiring this train of thought.)

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Not like he could stop if he wanted to. It's been going on for too long.

And anyway, he deserves it. He's the freak. He's broken, damaged. And at least it's something he's good at. With so much practice, he's gotten very good at sucking cock - and taking it. It gets him going, and it even pays. Not always, but often there's a few bucks for his trouble. So it can't be all bad.

More often than he'd ever admit, even to himself, Will wishes Mike would come to him for help like the others do. Will would make him feel so good. He wishes that he'd feel a tap on his shoulder at a party or between classes, as usual, and that he'd turn to find dark eyes and a galaxy of faint freckles gazing down at him. He wonders if Mike has ever gotten it from a guy before. Probably not. Will would get to show him, be his first, show him how good it can be - but it's always Eli Renner or Justin Cobbler or James Henrich. And Mike isn't like him. He's not a fairy. So it's never going to happen. But still, the scenario plays out in Will's mind when he should be sleeping. It always ends with him curling into himself under the sheets and feeling lonelier than ever.

But then Mike finds out through the grapevine. He won't look at Will for a week. Won't talk to him, won't even stay in the same room with him for too long. Will wants to cry, but finds that he only feels numb.

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It's at a party. Two - no, three guys have pulled him off into an upstairs bathroom. Will is drunk - too drunk. They're rough with him. They sneer, spit, mock. But they promised him money, and he needs it, and it's nothing he's not used to. But it hurts, and it exhausts him, and he's sore and limp and coughing by the time they're done. He wants to collect his payment and go home and pass out in bed, and he's relieved when they retreat and begin smoothing out their clothes and exchanging a high-five or two.

The bathroom door opens and one of the guys says, "You want a go?"

Whoever it is doesn't respond for a moment, and Will is too tired and drunk to look. Then a voice - a very familiar voice - says, "Are you done?"

"Yeah."

“Then fuck off.”

He’s not sure at first - he has to turn his head slowly, eyes dry and a little puffy - but it is. It’s Mike. Will’s heart, caught between a leap and a dive, performs an odd sideways jump.

The three guys scoff, leave some crumpled bills on the bathroom counter, and saunter off sniggering about Mike “needing some privacy.”

Mike gives Will a hand. Helps him up.

“Hey. You okay? Hey. On your feet, Will. Come on. Let’s get you cleaned up. Jesus. Are you okay? Will? Are you hurt?”

Confusion colors the fog in Will’s mind. Why is Mike here? Mike, who abandoned a coke can on the bathroom counter as soon as he came in, whose left palm is multicolored with the shadows of M&Ms past. Who has a barely-detectable mist of sweat rising at his neck and temples from the temperature of the party. Who had clearly been having fun downstairs before he found Will here. Why is Mike here, then? He hasn’t even looked Will in the eye lately.

But then he understands. Mike must be here for him. He came - finally, he came to Will for help. Like they all do. Will’s heart makes up its mind and soars skywards like a balloon with its string snipped. All at once Will can ignore his exhaustion. No payment required here - oh, no. Gorgeous, earnest, *good* Mike. Will has wanted to do this for a long time.

So when Mike helps him clean up and make himself presentable, and then offers a hand and says, “Ready?” Will nods and takes it immediately. Ready for anything. Aching body be damned.

But Mike leads him out of the bathroom, out of the house, away from the party. Maybe he wants Will in the privacy of his own home. But not that, either. Mike takes Will home. Where, thank God, Joyce is at a night shift and Jonathan is at college.

Will is still pretty fucked up from the party, and he can tell. He’s drunk, but he’s not stupid. Drunk, and still vaguely horny, and his

mind has settled in a weird, otherworldly kind of headspace. The kitchen light has a lurid quality on the tan tiles. The familiar angles of the hallway feel just a little *off* - stretched, maybe, or crooked. He feels off-kilter.

But he wants so much to help Mike - Mike, who handed him a warm washcloth and asked if he was hurting anywhere, who found his coat on their way out the door, who has been by his side through everything. Everything. Even this. Mike, with his sharp contrast of creamy, freckled skin to dark, unruly hair. Mike, with his big hands and serious, searching eyes and that tantalizing hint of Old Spice bar soap that hangs around him. Mike, who Will knows he loves; he stopped trying to deny it some years ago. There was no point. Mike, who is the only person Will truly wanted to touch in the first place, before he became this.

And Mike is so gentle with him. Bracing an arm around his shoulders when he drunk-stumbles, asking if he's all right, guiding him to his room. And Will had forgotten how good it felt to be touched by Mike, even in such a harmless gesture as an arm snugged around his shoulders. Will wants to arch up on his toes just to push into that touch. He wants to pay Mike back; he feels like he owes him, after this, after everything, and this is the best way he knows how to even out that debt. So when they get to his room, Will turns and wastes no time in getting on his knees.

Mike stops him with a hand on his shoulder and a half-questioning, half-warning, "Will -"

But Will shakes his head, looking up at his best friend. He suddenly feels like crying and has absolutely no idea why. It's infuriating.

"Please. Mike, please. I want... please let me. I-I'm good at it -"

He feels like he has to justify himself, to prove himself, but he can't tell why, and Mike suddenly looks so *sad*, and Will has to do something. He has to stop this, stop the stupid, *idiotic* tears that are pushing up his throat, stop that sad slant in Mike's eyes. Mike isn't like him. He's not a freak, not a fag, not a broken thing like Will is. That's why he hasn't sought Will out like the others. That's why he wouldn't look at him when he found out. But Will can do this for

him. He can be good. He can make Mike, *his* Mike, feel so good.

He fumbles with Mike's belt, fingers clumsy in his brain-fog. "Let me," he begs again. "I need to do this. Please, just... just let me..."

Mike stops him. Gently. So gently it makes Will angry. Why can't he be rough for once? Why can't he just use Will like all the others? Why does he have to be *so good*? And why... why doesn't he want him? The rejection makes his throat close and his eyes and nose go hot and tender, and he stands as quickly as he can - unsteady on his feet - and turns away.

"Fine. Leave."

"Will -"

"Go away, Mike."

So he does. He leaves Will in his bedroom, alone, where he collapses into his bed and feels like he's going to vomit. He doesn't, though. He falls asleep and wakes with one of the worst hangovers he's ever had.

Mike doesn't want him, won't even let Will touch him, and it hurts more than anything the others have done to his body. He avoids his best friend like the plague for the rest of the week. He can't stand seeing that handsome face, eyes turned in his direction, that  *fucking*  sad look written all over his face.

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To Will's utter shock, Mike comes back to him a few days later. Stops him after school and says they need to talk.

Will almost pushes past - he doesn't *want* to talk - but Mike curls a hand around his elbow and mutters, "Do you still want to?" so low and so quietly that Will almost doesn't hear him. But he did hear. And he hesitates. The rejection still stings, and he almost wants to say no and pull away, just for the satisfaction of turning the tables. But he wants Mike more. Wants to prove himself, somehow. Wants to redeem himself. So, cautiously, he nods.

They get back to the Wheeler's house and Will's breath is shallow. Mike calls around for his parents, despite the driveway being devoid

of cars. No answer, of course. Will heads for the basement automatically, but Mike's trajectory arcs off towards the stairs. They climb to his bedroom. They almost never hang out in his room; always the basement. Will feels shaky. A potent mix of expectation, confusion, and ridiculous nerves are sloshing around in his chest cavity.

Mike closes the door behind them. His lips click as they part for a long, shaky inhale. When Will deposits his backpack on the floor and turns, Mike is pulling his shirt off, one hand twisted in the back of the collar. Will's stomach swoops. There's no preliminary pleasantries or chitchat. They both know why they're here.

"I thought you didn't want to," Will snaps, his tone verging on petty. He feels childishly defensive, despite the arousal warming low in his belly.

Mike huffs. "You were drunk. And -"

"I knew what I was doing. I'm not stupid."

"And I don't want -"

Will internally flinches, curling in on himself.

*Don't want that. Don't want you.*

But that's not what Mike says. He hems and haws, weight ricocheting from one foot to the other. He's full of nervous energy, pacing and fidgeting, one hand raking through his hair.

"I don't want to *use* you like that," he snaps eventually.

*But that's what I'm for*, Will thinks, but he knows not to say it. Mike wouldn't like that. Wouldn't want to hear it. *That's what I'm good at. It's okay. It's really okay. It's what I chose.*

Hell, he'd be happy to let Mike use him. More than happy. But for just a moment, he has a stupid thought. That he'd be happier to be *with* Mike - to really be with him, like lovers are. Not just doing favors, not just fucking, but lovemaking. He shuts down that train of thought the moment it surfaces.

Mike makes an aborted gesture with an arm, sighs impatiently as if the words just won't come to him, and strides forward two steps. Into Will's space. Will swallows.

"You said you n—" Mike's head twists away with a flush of embarrassment, lips rubbing together. It's almost endearing. Then he seems to brace himself, and looks Will in the face again. "You said you needed to do this."

Will nods, slowly. His heart pounds hard enough to kick at his ribs and throb in his temples and fingertips. His voice gives out and his, "Yes," comes out a dry whisper.

"Why?"

"I don't know," Will lies. Because it's all he knows how to do, because it's all he deserves, because he's wanted to do this with Mike before he even knew what it was called. Because maybe if he can do this, if he can prove that he can be good, he won't feel so dirty.

And miraculously, Mike stares into Will's eyes, breathes out, and then nods. Once. Sharply.

"Okay."

Will blinks. "Okay?"

Mike looks vaguely terrified. His voice is right on the verge of shaking. But when he nods again the movement is firm. "Okay. But not like - like -" he points to some unspecified spot through the wall, perhaps back in time to the upstairs bathroom at the party. "*That.* I won't do that. I don't want to hurt you."

*I want you to hurt me*, Will thinks quietly. But he just nods. He doesn't want to do anything to stop whatever this is. He'll take whatever he can get. Whatever Mike wants.

Will isn't expecting the kiss. None of the others have ever kissed him - ever. Getting sucked off by a fag is one thing. What difference is there between a girl's mouth and a fairy's? But kissing one, well, that's something else entirely. That would make *them* fairies. Kissing is lovers' stuff. So when Mike pushes their mouths together, it takes

Will completely by surprise. He forgets to respond for a full three seconds. Then he rushes to kiss back. Mike's lips are dry and starting to chap, and Will can taste something vaguely sweet on his breath. Maybe chocolate.

Mike seems to blank on what to do next, so Will takes the reigns. He pulls them over to the bed - another first. It's always just a supply closet or behind the school sheds or some bathroom at a party. Never a real bed. It throws him off a little, but not enough to stop him. His mouth is pooling with saliva and he reaches for Mike's belt again. This time, Mike makes no move to stop him. He even lifts his hips to let Will slide his jeans and boxers down his legs. The blood leaves Will's head all at once when he sees how hard Mike already is, bouncing up against his stomach. It leaves him lightheaded for a second.

He wastes no time. He swoops down and captures the tip in his mouth, as though if he hesitates Mike will change his mind again.

It's surreal, doing this for Mike. Finally. The taste of him, the weight of him on Will's tongue, the way he pushes up on his elbows to watch but lets his head fall back within moments. Stripes of afternoon light fall over his face from the blind-covered window. His eyes are open but unfocused, turned up towards the glow-in-the-dark stars that have been on his ceiling for over a decade. He's lovely. And Will is using every trick in the book, everything he knows, trying to make this as good as it can be. He's got one hand braced beside Mike's hip, holding himself up, and the other curled around the base of his cock. He slides down as far as he can, swallowing when his gag reflex is almost triggered, and there's a soft *fump* as Mike falls back on the mattress. Will glows with pride. He's painfully hard in his own jeans, and his hips grind down into the mattress as he hollows his cheeks and pulls back. Swirls his tongue over the tip. Summons up more saliva and begins a quick bobbing rhythm.

Hands touch his face and begin to card through his hair - not grabbing, not guiding his movement with a rough grip like others have before, just stroking through his hair. Tugging just hard enough to send a cascade of shivers from Will's scalp to his tailbone. Mike is making small noises with increasing frequency, as if he was trying to keep quiet but can't anymore, and it makes Will ache for his touch.

Of course, Mike isn't going to touch him - that's not how this works - but his body refuses to accept that fact. He tries to content himself with Mike's hands in his hair.

Mike comes with a groan, tugging at Will's hair just barely hard enough to hurt, and Will shudders in satisfaction. He swallows quickly, pulls back to wipe his mouth, and tries to catch his breath.

The second kiss takes him just as off guard as the first. Will wonders if Mike can taste himself on his lips. But then he's startled again by the most tentative of touches down his belly, to the buckle of his belt. He's so surprised that he doesn't know what to say, whether to encourage him or tell him that it's alright, he doesn't have to. But before he knows it Mike has undone his jeans and is reaching into his boxers, moving quickly, as if forcing himself to act before he can chicken out. And Will stops wondering if he should tell Mike it's okay to stop, because all at once it is very much not okay to stop.

Especially when Mike leans over, stretching with his other hand to the drawer in his bedside table, and returns with a dollop of lube slicked on his palm. His jaw is set in a determined line and Will throws an arm around his neck as Mike grips him. He leans his forehead into his best friend's shoulder and pants hard. He can't breathe, can't think, doesn't want to. The angle is awkward, and Mike fumbles a time or two, but Will still comes so quickly he's mildly embarrassed.

## 2. Groceries

Will keeps servicing the boys who come to him. Sometimes he gets paid, sometimes not. But he never even considers asking Mike for money.

He didn't expect it to ever happen again, after that first time. It was a one-and-done deal - or so he thought. He figured Mike would allow it once, to purge it from their systems, and then never speak of it again. But a week later, in the early hours of the morning at a sleepover, it happens again in front of the blinking pause screen of the video game they'd been playing.

And again the next week.

And every time Mike reciprocates.

No one else ever wants to touch Will back.

That's the thing about Mike. Mike is different. Will gets on his knees for the others, lets them use him, lets them turn him around and fuck him if there's time and if they can pay. But he finds he looks forward to his times with Mike more than any of the others, even though they've done nothing beyond blow jobs. Because with Mike, it's like there's something more there. Something beyond just favors and fucking. Something dangerously close to lovemaking. And Will knows he's going to break his own heart, he knows how this will end, but it's too addictive to turn him down. So it keeps happening.

It's a Tuesday when a guy from the football team pulls him aside. Will isn't sure of his name - Nick? - and he doesn't exactly introduce himself. He asks if Will does anal, gets his answer, and that's the end of the conversation.

It's rough. Will's scalp stings from his hair being yanked, he's sure he has bruises all over and when he stands it hurts, when he moves it hurts, and he doesn't want to think about when he'll have to sit down.

He doesn't even bother to remind the guy to pay. He just dresses and

leaves.

He doesn't know why he's frustrated. It's not like that was the first time, although that was certainly one of the most difficult. He finds his feet carrying him in the direction of Mike's house.

Mike. Mike wouldn't have hurt him. When did that start to matter? When did the pain stop being comforting? When did it stop being a reminder that he was there, alive, in this dimension? When did being useful, being wanted, stop being enough?

He's moving slowly, grimacing, and Mike knows something's wrong when he opens the door. But his parents are home. Karen hollers hello at him from the living room, where she's watching over Holly, and Will can hear Ted's heavy footsteps somewhere upstairs.

Mike takes one look at Will, how he's moving so stiffly, and says, "You wanna get something to eat?"

They take Mike's car to the diner. The old vinyl seats are mildly better than the hard plastic chairs at school. Will orders a milkshake and breathes, breathes, trying to loosen his sore muscles.

"How many?" Mike says suddenly.

"What?"

"How many?"

"One." Will doesn't know why he answered, and Mike looks sorry he asked - though his expression would probably be worse if the answer was two or three or four. It was three when Mike found him at the party. "Just the one."

Mike is staring out the window at the purplish bank of thunderclouds pulling over Hawkins. "You still let guys use you like that?"

Will doesn't answer. He usually isn't ashamed - at least, he tells himself he isn't. Because this way he's useful, and wanted, and at least he's not hiding from himself anymore. And when his body hurts, when he can *feel* something, he's reassuringly certain of his location. Here. Present. In Hawkins - *his* Hawkins, not the shadowy other-town

- with another human being near him. Warm. Flesh-and-blood. At least he's not alone. But today all of those reasons taste like ashy spores on his tongue, and he takes a long pull of cookies-and-cream milkshake to drown it out.

Mike is still looking at him. "Do you have a boyfriend?"

Will actually laughs. "What? No." A boyfriend? For a broken, dirtied soul like him? In *Hawkins*? Yeah, right.

"Would you still do it if you did? I mean," Mike backs up at Will's glance of confused annoyance. "If you did, would you still... sell yourself like that?"

"I guess not. No." Will scrubs both hands over his face. He's getting tired of discussing his sex life, thank you very much. Not that Mike has no part in that particular subject, but still. It's been a bad day already; his whole body hurts like a mother; and the only effective coping mechanism he has for the flashbacks and the shadows and His voice in his head has stopped working. Will sits in an icy silence until Mike gets the hint and drops it.

A waitress comes out with Mike's food, and he spins the plate to offer Will some fries from across the table.

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He says yes to Justin and Eli again. He says yes to some guy in the art supply closet, and again a few days later. But when Toby Ernst approaches him, Will says no for the first time in a while. Nothing against Toby; Toby is objectively good-looking, with dishwater-blonde hair and endearingly crooked teeth and the scent of spearmint gum and cigarette smoke hanging around him. He's pulled Will aside before, and he always offers Will a piece of gum afterwards. But Will just doesn't feel like it anymore. It hasn't been helping. It used to leave him feeling empty, numb. At the very least, wanted. Like a sort of catharsis. Now he just feels like he needs to scrub down from the inside out in boiling water.

It pisses him off.

When did he get so weak? He knows what he wants, and he knows

it's stupid. Mike doesn't really want to be with him. Not like that. He only agreed the first time because drunk-Will said he needed it, and Mike is stupidly selfless enough that he went along with it. And they've only continued because of... of... well, lust, Will supposes. Nothing more.

That doesn't stop him from pressing eagerly forward that night when Mike kisses him over a spread of homework.

Yes, the hungry thing inside him gasps. *This.*

Mike's autumn-rich scent and the shape of his lips and the firm touch of his thighs slotting between Will's, rising to kneel on the mattress. His dick prods at Will's belly through his jeans, already hard, and Will surges forward to press Mike's shoulder blades into the wall. He's been frustrated for days. Striving for that distraction, that release, and coming up against a wall each time. But this, already, is better. Mike's mouth opens under Will's tongue, and the edges and corners of this week's loneliness, this week's anxiety, start to fall away.

Usually Will takes the backseat in moments like these. He does what the other guys ask or say, lets them arrange it as they will. Not this time, though. This time he's desperate. He needs and he will have.

Mike's parents are downstairs, so they strip down in a feverish silence. Their breathing and the sounds of cloth-on-cloth and skin-on-skin are the only sounds in the room, and somehow it seems to pull the air in close and thick until Will feels a prickle of sweat at his hairline. They get distracted by play-wrestling for a few minutes until Mike manages to pin him, and Will takes the upper hand again by canting one thigh up between Mike's legs. That gets them back on track in no time. But they're suppressing giggles, now, shushing each other and then laughing all over again even as they exchange a string of quick, hot kisses. Will retrieves the bottle from the drawer, this time, and reaches for Mike with a nearly-dripping hand. He's about a minute into a hand job, and Mike is panting softly into his pillow, when Will decides he wants more. He crawls up the bed to ask, nudging Mike's face out of the pillow, and Mike turns a peculiar shade of red-pink. Will tries to fix it in his mind, swearing he'll sketch it out in colored pencil later, as Mike eventually stammers out

agreeance.

Mike is looking more than a little lost, and a tinge panicked, so Will presses him down and sets to work fingering himself open. Mike's hands end up in his hair again, between intermittent kisses, and Will breathes hard against his lips.

In this moment, Will can't tell if it's working or not. He doesn't feel as harshly, undeniably grounded as he usually does; it's not numbing him to the rest of the world. This is something different. But somehow, it almost feels *better*. Especially when he whispers that he's ready, and Mike whispers back, "You sure?"

Will's answer is to hike one palm up against the base of Mike's skull, nuzzling him briefly, and then position himself. He's doing most of the work, at first, until Mike catches on to the rhythm and braces Will's hips in his hands. They move gently to keep the bed from rocking into the wall - or maybe it's just that Mike is being gentle with him. The idea catches Will so off-guard that he makes a choked sound halfway between a laugh and a sob. Oh, Mike.

But somehow he can't let that continue. He won't let it. He won't let Mike be so *nice* to him; he doesn't know what to do with it, doesn't know how. So Will coaxes Mike up and tugs the nest of bedding to the floor, where the bedframe can't bang into the wall and draw attention. Their forgotten homework scatters on the carpet and Mike swats it away impatiently. Will repositions them, moving fast, whispering and reassuring and teasing until Mike's control breaks with a low whimper. He flips them. Bites down on Will's lower lip. Moves to suck a trail of hickeys down his neck as he pounds into him. Not gentle anymore, but hungry. This Will knows. This he understands.

The release he's been straining for all week sweeps over him all too easily now.

He finds himself back in unfamiliar territory when they're lying on the ground in a puddle, limbs spread out over the rumpled bedding. One corner of the sheets still clings to the mattress. They catch their breath with Mike's head pillowied on Will's collar bone, and when they rise, Will doesn't quite know what to do. That's usually it; scene

end, payment received, exit stage left. Slink away as quietly as possible and go calculate what kind of new art supplies you can afford now. Not this time. Mike sneaks to the bathroom and back to get them a washcloth, and ten minutes later they're in the basement pouring over a stack of VHS tapes, homework abandoned where it fell.

They've fallen into a feedback loop, laughing at increasingly stupid stuff, and it takes them approximately ten minutes just to choose a movie. They shove and poke fun at each other, and Mike's dark eyes are alight with mischief. His lips are still flushed from kissing, and his hair is an absolute mess. Will can't stop sneaking looks at him from the corner of his eye. They smell like each other, and like sex, and Will realizes with a painful jolt how fucking stupid he's being. What a huge mistake he just made.

He just forgot. For a moment, perhaps sixty seconds, he forgot that this isn't real. He forgot what this is. For a moment, he let himself believe that this could *be*, that *they* could be. Because he's a moron. He's a weak fucking idiot, and -

God, what is he thinking?

Will is fucked. And he knows it. And he knows what he has to do; he knows this has to stop.

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The hurt and confusion in Mike's eyes is more painful than anything else. He tries to catch Will's gaze from across the room, across the hall. He tries to catch up to him, to talk to him, but Will evades.

He's been avoiding Mike all week.

He says yes to the others almost every day, again and again, sniffing out parties and hoping he can find a group that wants him. Hoping that will be enough, that maybe if he just forges ahead it'll go back to how it was. But it's not helping. It's not helping, and the flashbacks are getting bad this week, and yesterday he spent a good hour with his back pressed into a corner, locked in a panic attack. It drained him so much that he went to bed at 6pm, making thin excuses to his mother's concerned eyes, only to claw himself awake from a

nightmare at 3am. He's been awake ever since.

He doesn't hang around after school today. He can't summon up the energy to service anyone, and he doesn't want to face the Party. Plus, avoiding Mike means avoiding the Party in general. It's been a lonely week.

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It takes Mike another two days to corner him. It's not Will's fault; he wasn't expecting to be suddenly grabbed in the dairy section of the grocery store. His guard was down. But here they are.

"Jesus, Mike!" he hisses with a palm pressed over his pounding heart.

"Sorry. I j-" Mike lets go of Will's shoulder and grimaces off in a random direction, as if trying to collect his thoughts. "I saw you and -"

"Scared the shit out of me."

"Please talk to me."

Will stops. He knows what he *should* do. He should walk away. Get what he needs and leave. Leave Mike to move on with his life and go fool around with some pretty girl. Someone he can actually love. Someone he actually wants, beyond just lust and curiosity. But Mike says it again - "*Please talk to me.*" - and he sounds so small, so miserable, that Will does the stupid thing again.

"Okay," he hears himself say. "Fine."

Mike's hands are full of random groceries; evidently he's here for the same reasons as Will. A loaf of bread. Chili powder. Parmesan cheese. A scrap of paper covered in Karen Wheeler's delicate cursive. Mike shifts his armful and steps closer to lower his voice.

He says he's sorry. He asks what he did wrong. He makes promises. And Will can't seem to summon the strength to open his mouth and make it stop.

He glares down at the shiny white tiles. All he wanted was some ice cream, and the ground beef his mom asked him to pick up for dinner

tonight, and maybe some strawberries or something.

Mike is getting frustrated, and it slants the timbre of his voice.

“Look, if you didn’t want -”

“I did,” Will snaps back, finally looking him in the eye. “That’s what - that’s the -” He shakes his head, licking dry lips. His voice falls, even though no one is really around, and Mike has to lean into his space to hear. “I did want to. I’ve always - whatever. It doesn’t matter. It can’t work.”

“What can’t -”

“You don’t want that.” Will’s shoulders twitch up. “I know. That’s not what you want, and that’s not how I work, and - it just can’t -”

Mike’s brows sink. Now he’s angry. “How do you know what I want?”

Will gives a bark of laughter and gestures at nothing. “I think it’s pretty clear. Mike, don’t be a dumbass. You don’t want me.”

“Yeah?”

Something bounces off the toe of Will’s shoe - probably the loaf of bread, by the feel of it - but he doesn’t get a chance to see. Mike is taking up all of his visual field. Kissing him. The softness of it is such a departure from their harsh tones that it takes Will a few seconds to pull away in a panic.

“Public!” he sputters, head snapping around to scan for other shoppers.

“Be my boyfriend.”

“What?”

Will has no idea what the hell is happening. All he wanted was some goddamn rocky road.

Mike’s groceries are still scattered around their feet. Will can feel the soft weight of the bread leaning against his ankle.

“Be my boyfriend.”

Will stares. He laughs - he doesn't mean to, but he's so lost and high-strung that the nervous energy comes out in a stilted bubble of giggles. “Mike, I don't - you don't -”

“Yes,” Mike says, “I do.”

Will's mind is blank. He wouldn't know what to feel even if he *could* feel. He ends up mumbling, “I'm not really boyfriend material. I - I don't know how to...”

*To do anything except be a fairy-slut?* a voice sneers in the back of his mind, and this time he can't silence it. He can't come up with any of his excuses. He just crumples inside of himself. He thinks once the numbness goes away that he might cry. And he doesn't want to be here when that happens. He has to go. Has to run.

“You think I know either?” Mike lifts both palms in a helpless gesture, then changes trajectories halfway through the movement and reaches for Will's hands. “Will, come on. Please. Stop doing this to yourself. I want -”

“No, you don't,” Will snarls, and jerks out of Mike's grip. He's out the doors and a block down the street before he even realizes it, feeling so much at once that he wants to scream.

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

Again, this isn't my usual style so I would love to hear any thoughts you may have! Thank you for reading :)

### 3. Radios

It's been nearly two weeks since Will has said yes to anyone at all. Just about a record. He stopped hanging around waiting for a tap on his shoulder; he stopped looking for parties; he stopped agreeing when guys caught up to him in the hallway or on the street. He just stopped. It's earned him more than a few disgruntled comments and annoyed glares, but he just can't bring himself to do it. The idea of sneaking off with some guy for even five or ten minutes turns his stomach.

Not Mike. No, not Mike. Because the universe is not fair, and never has been, and seems to have it out for Will in particular, he absolutely *yearns* for Mike. And not just for sex. It would be so much easier if Will only wanted Mike's hands on him, wanted his cock, his soft-slick tongue. And he wants those too, of course. But more than that, he just wants Mike's fingers entwined with his. Mike's laugh. Their late-night conversations and random radio calls.

He misses his best friend. He really fucking misses him. How they were before all this, and how they were for those brief, impossible days before Will fucked it all up. He misses what *almost*, but never was.

Never could be. He has to tell himself that over and over. Never could be.

Will rejoins the Party. He hadn't really realized how absent he's been until Dustin jumps up from the lunch table to hug him, and Lucas's wide grin takes over his whole face, and Max and El attack him with questions from each side. They ask what he's been up to, and he gives them half-truths, and he settles into the space they still save for him despite how often he's gone lately. Mike gives him a nod. Polite. Not unfriendly. But nothing more.

And that's how it is. For days. And then a week. And then two. Polite, and not unfriendly, and that's it. He and Mike hang out with the Party, and they talk to each other as much as any of the others. But it's painfully shallow. Surface-level only. As if they're merely acquaintances with several mutual friends. Will would honestly

rather just not see Mike at all. He'd rather just go back to avoiding each other than go through *this* every lunch period and campaign. But he really did miss the Party, and his friends deserve better than how he's been acting. So he tries. And he pretends he doesn't feel the sharp-dull pain right in the center of his ribcage every time he and his best friend - ex best friend? - exchange a joke or a pleasantry in the presence of the group, only to ignore each other's existence once they part ways.

The Party knows something's up. They're not stupid. And they've tried to orchestrate some sort of make-up between them, to no avail. They know the Paladin and Cleric had some fight - a big one - but that's all. And eventually, they put their hands up in surrender and leave them to figure it out on their own.

Will goes through the motions of talking to Mike. Goes through the motions of how his life used to be. He even starts to get back in the rhythm. He hangs out with the Party, meets up with Max or Dustin or El or Lucas, gets caught up with them after such a long stretch of increasingly spotty communication. He goes home after school. Cooks dinner with his mother one night. Cracks open some art supplies that he hasn't used in a while. Teases his brother and plays with his dog. Not that he hasn't been doing those things; he has. They just stopped being a priority somewhere along the way, and he almost forgot to enjoy them. Maybe if the universe is trying to impart some lesson on him through all of this, that was it. He just wishes he would feel better already if that was the case. Because right now he just feels guilty.

He misses the income; he keeps thinking of buying something only to realize that his wallet is no longer fed by a steady stream of coins and small bills. But every time he thinks about hanging around a house party for a while, seeing who finds him, a slew of unpleasant things creeps through his stomach. He tells himself next time. Next time someone approaches him he'll do it. Next weekend he'll find out who's throwing a party. Tomorrow he'll go see what Justin and James and Eli are up to. But somehow, "next time" keeps being "next time," never quite making it to "this time." And as time goes by, the taps on his shoulder grow more and more infrequent.

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It's 3:48am, according to the red glow of his alarm clock, when Will breaks.

"Code Red," he half-whispers. And he waits.

The hard plastic of the radio in his hand makes him feel like a kid again. Now more than ever. Or maybe it's the sweat, already gone cold on his shirt collar and at his temples. Or the sheets knotted around his legs that caused him to jolt awake in a panic, trying to kick off the slime-coated vines of his nightmares. Or maybe it's just the haunting sensation of being completely alone; beyond help, beyond reach. It's the kind of marrow-deep loneliness that he's never really been able to scrub off, even in almost six years, and tonight it's bad.

The radio gives the slightest noise, and Will's fingers twitch around it. Then -

"Will?"

"Mike." The word opens around a pathetic sob. Of course it's Mike. It wouldn't be anyone else, this is *their* channel. He's just so relieved - so fucking relieved to hear his voice.

"What's wrong? It's..." There's a pause as Mike most likely hoists himself up in bed to see his own clock. "Late." His voice is thick with sleep, rough around the edges. He doesn't even bother using proper radio etiquette.

Will sniffls with his right thumb hovering over the talk button. His other hand pushes over one eye and then the other, and then rubs over his mouth. The tears won't stop now that they've started, and he hates himself for it. He opens his mouth again and it comes out.

"I miss you."

Mike barely hesitates. "Yeah. I miss you too." There's some white noise and bumping, like he's repositioning himself. Will has the sudden and achingly intense desire to teleport into Mike's room and curl up against him, holding as hard as he can until this all goes away

and it's okay again. "God, I - I miss you too."

Neither one speaks for a few seconds. What else is there to say?

Then, with a sick twist in his gut, Will knows exactly what else there is to say.

"I'm sorry." His forehead drops forward to rest on the radio. "I'm sorry, I'm so sorry -"

Mike doesn't answer, and it's worse than a solid rejection. He doesn't say, "It's okay," because it's not. None of this is okay.

But he doesn't get off the channel, either. Will can hear him breathing every once in a while, as if he keeps holding down the talk button and then not knowing what to say.

Will has wrestled his diaphragm half under control again, by way of exhausting effort, before Mike says anything at all.

"Are you okay?"

No. No, no, no no no -

"Yeah. Just a nightmare."

*I wanna see you*, Will begs, but he won't let it come out of his mouth.

"Don't tell me," Mike says. His tone has shifted a degree and Will tilts his head in question as if Mike could see him through the radio. "The one about Big Bird eating your hair, right?"

Will actually giggles. It's a wet, stilted laugh, but a real one. It's been approximately eleven years since he had that nightmare, and Mike has never let him live it down.

"Definitely," he agrees.

They talk until Will falls asleep again, which might be two hours or it might be ten minutes. He wasn't looking at the clock, so there's no real way to tell. But when he wakes up to his 6:00am school day alarm, he's still holding the radio.

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They still don't hang out on their own. During the daytime, they follow the same tired routine they have been for the past couple weeks. Talk to each other when the Party is together; mainly ignore each other otherwise. But at night, they talk. First it's Mike who calls, and the next day it's Will. Every night. Like when they were kids. They stay up late, wearing out their radios' batteries, ruining their sleep cycles.

It's the first full, deep breath that Will has had in a long time.

They talk all through the night, and during the day, Will thinks. And maybe it's the sleep deprivation, but everything starts getting turned around and backwards in his mind. He starts having stupid thoughts again. Dangerous ones. Ones that can't work.

Then he and Mike end up walking out the school doors side-by-side, and the rest of the Party dissipates, and all at once they're alone for the first time in... Will doesn't know how long. And instead of bolting in opposite directions, they just keep walking. Just like they used to. As if they never stopped doing this.

Neither one says anything about it. They just end up at Will's house for most of the afternoon, on the floor of the living room, making fun of commercials and pretending to think about their American Literature essays. Will tries not to notice Mike watching him, but it's impossible not to notice how much lighter he feels afterwards.

He's awake long after they say goodbye on their radios that night.

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It's almost on a whim. A poor night's sleep deposits him on the crack of dawn with stiff joints and puffy eyes. He knows he won't be sleeping anymore, so Will lifts his tired body from the mattress, showers, brushes his teeth, and dresses in the pre-dawn light. It's way too early to leave for school, but he closes the front door behind him as softly as he can and wipes the dew from the seat of his bike with a

sleeve.

He dressed for the warmth of the coming day, but his windbreaker doesn't quite block out the damp chill of the morning. He's prickling with goosebumps scalp-to-toes by the time he pulls up to the highwayside cafe, already open and serving whatever traffic is passing through Hawkins, pausing only for caffeine before rushing off to better places.

He orders at the counter, basks in the coffee-and-pastries scented warmth while he waits, and then struggles to arrange everything in the basket of his bike so it won't fall over at every bump. He has to pause and shuck his jacket halfway through the ride, arranging the slippery fabric over his haul to protect it from the first spatters of rain.

When Mike trots down the front stoop of his house, keys in hand and backpack slung over one shoulder, Will is waiting at the corner of the lawn. Mike's pace hitches, slows, and then returns to normal. He's got the hood of his sweatshirt pulled up, and a couple dark curls are endeavoring to escape.

"Hey."

Will's right hand flexes and releases around the bike handle where it rests. "Hey."

"Want a ride?"

"Yeah."

Will leaves his bike leaning against the Wheeler's house, mostly out of the way of the rain. Mike doesn't ask questions. His house isn't exactly on the way to school from the Byers', but all he says as he starts the car is, "What's that?"

Will pulls his jacket back on and hands over what it had been shielding. "Coffee."

"And donuts?" Mike selects the maple-glazed - leaving the jelly-filled for Will - and slots his coffee into a cupholder after a quick sip. He pulls out of the driveway with one hand and goes after the donut

with the other.

“So who died?”

Will’s lips quirk up to the side. The rain is getting a little more serious now, drumming at the roof of the Wheeler’s “second car,” which Mike likes to believe is his. And it probably will be, after a couple years. His mom only uses it to get groceries and occasionally drive Holly around, and with Nancy away at college now, Mike is the only one who consistently drives it anymore. It’s fifth-hand and hasn’t stopped smelling vaguely like cigarette smoke since two owners ago, but Mike loves it.

“Uh, nothing - no one.” Will wants to apologize. He wants to explain. But he’s nervous, and unsure, and it takes a few minutes for him to speak again. His words come out defensive and half-sharp. “Look, I - I want -”

Mike takes a deliberate bite of his donut, which is more than halfway gone already. Will’s own fingers have pushed deep dimples into the sugar-crusted shape of his own untouched jelly-filled. He wishes Mike would say something - say the perfect thing, like he always seems to, and like Will never can. But Mike leaves Will and the rain to fill the silence in the car. It’s tense. Will shifts on the worn cloth seat. He can tell Mike is still mad at him; he can feel it radiating across the gear shift. And he can’t deny he deserves it.

“I don’t know how this works,” he bursts out. “I don’t know how to - what -” He huffs out a breath through his nose and goes to sip his own coffee, only to abort the movement halfway through as words come to him. “It’s just - I’m the worst, okay? Really. I was a total dick and -” He can’t seem to make himself say the words, *I was scared*, so he gives up on that line of thought and pushes through. “If you still want...”

Mike has finished his donut, and he fishes his coffee out of the cupholder. He still hasn’t said anything.

They’ve nearly made it to the school parking lot. They’re in the line of cars, red and yellow lights shining through the misty-rainy haze. The old car is finally warming up; inside it’s a cozy, coffee-and-sugar

scented defiance of the outside chill. Private and self-contained. Like a spaceship, or a train car in the beginning of some adventure story. It feels safe, like they're in their own little space separate from the real world, if only for a few minutes. And maybe that's what gives Will the push to say it.

"I do want to."

There's a flicker of movement to his left, like Mike turned his head, but Will is facing the window. His breath makes a faint semi-circle of fog on the glass.

"You do?"

A honk startles them both and Mike hurries to pull forward in line. They've reached the parking lot now, and Mike passes by several closer spots in favor of one nearer to the back, under the trailing branches of a maple. He stops the car. Neither one makes a single move to get out.

"Yeah." It should be easier to say the second time, but now Mike is watching him and Will can't seem to make himself meet his best friend's eyes for too long. It's like looking into a bright light. His gaze skitters off the the side and tracks raindrops down the windshield. "I do want to, and I'm - I'm sorry. About -" he gestures and realizes he's still holding the donut. "Everything. I guess."

He takes a huge bite of the donut, frowning. He's bad at this.

"It's okay."

Will looks over mid-bite. He can feel sugar sticking to his cheek and he swipes it away with the back of a thumb.

*No it's not, he thinks, I know it's not.*

But Mike shrugs, swirls his coffee, and meets Will's eyes again. "It's okay."

"I was an asshole."

"Yeah."

For a moment, they both half-laugh.

“Yeah, you were. It was kind of fucked up.”

Again, Will wants to explain somehow. But he doesn’t know what he could possibly say that would make Mike understand - and anyway, he has a weird feeling that Mike understands already. Not entirely. Not all of it. But maybe just enough. So instead of apologizing again like a stuck record, he just eats his donut.

“But,” Mike says, “With coffee and donuts... I might consider it.”

“Really? I mean, you still want to be -?”

Mike leans across the parking brake so suddenly that Will almost spills coffee all over both of them. But by a fumble and a miracle, he saves it. The kiss is hard, a little crooked, and something rough and gentle all at once. A sheet of tension gives way in Will’s chest. He hadn’t realized how bad it was - hadn’t even realized it was there - until it was gone. He lets out a long breath and leans into Mike’s lips.

“Yeah,” Mike confirms when they break apart for a moment. Will can’t help it. He grins, wide and uncontrollable, and does his best to lean in for another kiss at the same time.

“Promise me something though?” Mike mumbles against Will’s lips, and Will tilts his head.

“Hm?”

“Don’t let people use you like that anymore. Don’t... *hurt* yourself like that.”

A contrary wave of annoyance sweeps over him, making him *almost* pull away and snap something defensive. But he’s too tired of fighting, and anyway, how long has it been? Weeks? And longer since he actually wanted to. So he just shrugs. He’s too stubborn to say *okay*, even though he’s already agreed in his head.

But maybe Mike understands that too. Because when they lean apart, Mike doesn’t push for a real answer. He just looks towards the school building, grimaces, looks back to Will, and says, “You wanna go to

school?”

“Um, no?”

“Me either.”

Will chokes on a laugh as Mike starts up the car and yanks it out of the parking space with much more force than necessary.

“Go, go!” Will laughs - as if someone is about to burst from the school doors and chase them down. They pass the line of cars waiting to park and zoom around the corner at a pace that would make Max proud.

This is gonna come back to haunt them the moment they step foot back in school - and probably sooner. But there’s much worse situations to be in. And Will can’t say he dreads the idea of having detention together.

They roll out of the parking lot and off down the road, lumbering away as fast as the car’s shitty acceleration will allow.

Rain lashes across the road. The windshield wipers cut back and forth, and Mike downs the last swallow of his coffee like a shot while Will turns on the radio.

“Where do you wanna go?”

“Dunno. Don’t care.”

The realization hits him as they splash through the streets. He’s not numb anymore. And for the first time in a while, he doesn’t want to be. This won’t be easy - he knows it won’t - but for now, he’s not going to think about that. Neither of them knows what they’re doing. And somehow, that’s almost comforting.

Will takes Mike’s hand where it rests on the gear shift. His eyes catch on the red letters of the grocery store, shining through the rain as they pass. He never did get that Rocky Road.

Will’s hand twitches around Mike’s with a thought, and Mike glances at him curiously.

“Actually - you feel like getting ice cream?”

**Notes for the Chapter:**

Heya, thanks for reading! Please let me know any thoughts you have if you have a moment, I always love hearing what you guys think :)

And yes, now that this plot bunny is out of my brain, I'll be starting work on the Red Envelope sequel. Stay tuned.

Thanks again!